Transcendentalism Speech

Intro: In the mid 1800’s nestled between the secluded woods of Concord and the bustling commerce hub of Boston Massachusetts there lived a select group of people mainly scholars and poets who would start a Movement so profound that its influence is still felt today. They would call themselves the transcendentalists because their goal was to encourage society to transcend or go beyond what they thought was logical and understandable, to search for the world’s Truths in the human connection with nature and the universe where they believed the world began.

My first objective is students should be able to identify at ***least*** two leaders and/ or great thinkers of the Transcendental Movement and describe their impact on at **leas**t two important individuals throughout history. Then my second objective which is a project we will complete after my presentation. Students should be able to imagine that if they were Thoreau today what they would do to improve our society. Students will create a sign stating how they will better our world or a design/logo for a cause they would create or support. And then I will put them together at home as a class collage and bring it back in for Mr. Holliday.

Here is a formal definition of Transcendentalism, broken down it simply means a movement that originated in the mid 1800’s that explored how humans were connected with nature and encouraged people to study and spend time in nature to learn more about themselves and their importance in the universe.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was really the center of the American transcendental movement. He attended Harvard School of Divinity where he became an ordained minister, but resigned from his position after his wife’s death. He set out most of his ideas and values about Transcendentalism in his book, [*Nature*](http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/nature.html), which was published in 1836. His book represented at least ten years of intense study in philosophy, religion, and literature. With his fellow transcendentalist Margaret Fuller he published and edited the Dial, which was a newspaper for Transcendentalist ideas. Emerson was an avid individualist or someone who encouraged people to focus on themselves as an individual person, and look within to discover the answers to the world’s questions. Emerson believed that every single man’s opinion was important. His many ideas about how to best live life and connect with nature inspired many Transcendentalists who would follow in his footsteps.

Henry David Thoreau was another Transcendentalist who like Emerson, was a graduate of Harvard. In fact, it was at Harvard that Thoreau first read Emerson’s book Nature and became inspired by its ideas. After Harvard he decided that to truly explore Emerson’s ideas fully he would live alone for two years in a small cabin near Walden Pond Massachusetts, in order to really connect with nature and write his first book. After 26 months of intense reading, writing, and studying his surroundings Thoreau had completed his first full draft of Walden, his famous book about his experiences at the pond. But, Henry David Thoreau’s life was not fully consumed with literature. Rather he was an avid abolitionist who peacefully protested slavery and called for equal rights for every man. It was his beliefs that got him trouble. Thoreau was jailed for his resistance and protest of the Mexican War (and its attempts to extend slavery), but the essay Civil Disobedience, which he wrote about his experiences were his real triumph. Thoreau’s groundbreaking social experiments and attempts at peaceful protest would provide influence for later world leaders who would forever change history.

Another trailblazer, Margaret Fuller, was a prominent woman Transcendentalist who was great friends with many intellectuals of the day from Concord and Boston, including Waldo Emerson. She served with Emerson as editor of The Dial, the Transcendentalist newspaper for which she wrote many reviews of art, and literature. Later in life she published a book about her journeys westward which impressed many in and outside of her literary circle including Horace Greely who asked her to become book review editor for the New York Tribune where she eventually became successful and branched out into various other cultural subjects. A year after taking the job at the Tribune, Margaret Fuller published her popular classic Woman in the Nineteenth Century from an essay she had originally published for The Dial. Margaret Fuller’s brilliant novel and ideas about equality for women were an inspiration not only to the ladies of the time period, but also to those today. She proved that the expansion of thoughts and ideals that was gripping the nation during the 1800’s were just as accessible to women as they were to men.

Many of these Transcendentalists including Emerson and Thoreau had an enormous impact on future authors, poets, and activists.

Walt Whitman was a major poet of the 1800’s whose work includes Song of Myself and Leaves of Grass. Whitman had read about Emerson and the Transcendentalists during his time in college and incorporated their ideas throughout much of his work. Like Emerson he used themes from nature and their connection to our human world in his literary works. Whitman believed himself to be the young poet Emerson had claimed the world needed in his essay The Poet and strived to prove himself as much, even publishing a letter of praise Emerson sent him in one of his books. On the other hand Emily Dickinson, one of the most renowned and well read poets of her time was not a Transcendentalist by definition but often read and admired Emerson’s work and embodied his ideals. She never tried to include his ideas in her poems. Rather, like Emerson, Emily Dickinson was an individualist who believed in being her own unique person and was uninfluenced by society and the outside world. She took pride in who she was and her distinctive outlook on literature made her a transcendentalist in her own right.

Finally, Henry David Thoreau who perfected the art of peaceful protest became a muse to many well known activists. Mahatma Gandhi, the famous Indian protester, cited Thoreau’s essay Civil Disobedience and its ideas as a major influence on his peaceful resistance campaigns in both India and South Africa. From Thoreau he learned that one could peacefully go against government and demand changes be made. Like Gandhi, it was in Thoreau’s essay Civil Disobedience that Martin Luther King Jr. first learned of peaceful protest. During college Dr. King read Thoreau’s work and was inspired by his idea of standing up for your beliefs at all costs, a mindset he showcased during his time as an influential African American civil rights activist. Like Thoreau, Dr. King was jailed several times for his beliefs, but he never gave up on his cause.

Over a short period of time several individuals who called themselves Transcendentalists reinvigorated literature, philosophy, and religion, and expanded America’s thoughts on these subjects. The result of so many intellectual minds at work was a movement whose impact still ripples through today’s modern cultural arts and spiritual practices.